



## Reform for good?

WHETHER you are a Conservative or not, there is no denying that Sayeeda Warsi's appointment is another significant barrier that has been crossed in diverse Britain.

If her elevation to minister without portfolio appeared vacuous and irrelevant, at least on paper, her interview with *Eastern Eye* suggests quite the contrary.

Her position as troubleshooter-in-chief for David Cameron may not make her the most popular person in the cabinet, but it is a sign that the prime minister believes she has the political acumen, energy and intelligence to wield to good effect.

And in many ways, that symbolises his trust in her – but the government still needs to make tracks on putting women at the heart of government. The cabinet picture on that is far from flattering and Britain still has a long way to go to match its European counterparts.

Warsi suggests that electoral reform can help to reconnect the public with politics and politicians. That angle has been submerged by arguments about proportional representation (PR) and what sort of PR system would best suit this country.

It is very much the Conservative agenda on electoral reform, but as a vehicle to help break down barriers and get a more diverse cross-section of people into parliament, it really shouldn't be ignored.

As Warsi suggests, reforms could help increase ethnic representation – and we are still a long way from having a proportional and representative parliament.

We are some 50 per cent below where we should be in terms of parliament looking like the rest of the country. Warsi raised the point that it would be preferable to have people from ethnic minority backgrounds across the parties.

It's shame that she herself was never an MP – but perhaps the fact that she isn't now will allow her to devote herself to the task of maintaining the Tories' momentum in this area.

They may not have as many black or Asian MPs as the Labour party but the 'influx' (in relative terms, of course) has helped give the party leverage and influence where it once had none.

Is there not some irony in the spectre of the Conservative Party being able to lecture their Lib Dem coalition partners on this?

But let us not get carried away – we will be watching to see how far the government's good intentions will translate into effective, lasting and positive change for all Asian communities.

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MEETING: The new Cabinet

# POLITICAL CON?

**The government's much-vaunted promise of a new style of politics is exaggerated, and diversity will suffer in its wake too**

**FOR the past 30 years, I have been married. Oh... and before you ask; yes, to the same person!**

Ask anyone, though, even if they have only been married a few years and they will tell you the same thing – it is not easy.

Even when it begins with romance, love and a shared vision of what is important in life, marriage has to be worked at. So how soon can we expect the marriage counsellors to be circling round the "shotgun marriage" that is the Lib-Con coalition?

Marriage should be a partnership of equals. The Lib-Con coalition is not. It is not even a teaming up of two parties with independent views. The Liberal party itself has never been a united party. It exists of two separate and ideologically opposed factions, held together only by the glue of proportional representation.

The first faction is on the right of the political spectrum. Nick Clegg, David Laws and Chris Huhne belong here, and this was the faction that was so keen to jump into a coalition with David Cameron and begin 'slashing' public services and our welfare state.

The other face of the Liberal party is po-



by **BARRY GARDINER**

Labour MP for Brent North

sitioned on the left. Simon Hughes, Charlie Kennedy and David Steel sit here, and the revulsion this faction feels about the 'unholy alliance' has been made publicly clear.

This weekend, Charles Kennedy, a previous leader of the Liberals expressed his fear that the Tories may swallow up his party. He said: "Our political compass currently feels confused... I felt personally unable to vote for this outcome when it was presented to Liberal Democrat parliamentarians."

Many people who voted for the Liberals at the election would describe their dissatisfaction in stronger terms than 'confused'. An opinion poll published this weekend showed that "a third of voters who backed the Lib Dems feel Mr Clegg has sold out the party's principles".

While I feel sorry for those voters whose

views are being sold down the river, I cannot say I am surprised. In Brent where I come from, we are used to the Lib Dems being called "The Not-Exactly-Honest-Party".

At this election, the Liberals proposed an amnesty for illegal immigrants while the Tories proposed a cap on immigration. The Liberals wanted to give the poorest a £10,000 tax-free allowance, while Tories wanted £200,000 tax cuts for the richest 3,000 estates. The Liberals asked for further European integration while the Tories are openly hostile to Europe. These are just three examples among many which show the rift that now sits at the heart of government. Jokes in the Rose Garden at No 10 will not hide this deep ideological division.

Cameron may try to use the Liberals to present a more progressive image of his 'Nasty Party'. But how can a cabinet that only has two women and one unelected person from a minority background, claim to be progressive or represent a new politics? Diversity may be the first and most obvious issue on which this government is seen to take Britain backwards.

Sadly, it is unlikely to be the last.

The views expressed in this editorial do not necessarily reflect those of the newspaper

REVIEW OF THE WEEK

## THAWING THE ICE OF DISTRUST



A NEW book looking at the bridges formed between Westerners and the Indian subcontinent in the 1950s could shed new light on a chapter of Asian history.

*Ice In Every Carriage: An Extraordinary Asian Journey 1952-53* records the initiative of an American who leads a group of almost 200 westerners into India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka to build relationships between two opposing cultures.

It is the 11th book for Michael Henderson (pictured left), an English journalist whose first two books, *From India With Hope* and *Experiment With Untruth - India Under Emergency* were written in India.

The book records meetings between Indians, Pakistanis and

by **SOFIA MITRA-THAKUR**

Sri Lankans with Europeans and Americans just five years into Independence. The surprising result was that many of them found skin colour and religious differences fell away when they met each other face to face.

Henderson looks at a period of time when Asia could have easily been at odds with the West after winning independence and freedom from colonial rule, but the sensitive venture he describes prevents much hostility and promotes brotherhood.

However, it is worth noting that the account described in the book may not be reflective of others' experience in what was undoubtedly a turbulent period.

A foreword by Rajmohan Gandhi, a biographer and the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, calls the book a "priceless record of a bold, multicultural initiative by civil society at a time when people did not use such phrases. And it is proof that history is often made by people usually missed out by historians".

Gandhi also makes the point that the book raises the question of the walls between the West and the Muslim world, and whether it is possible for an inspired pioneer to follow in Henderson's footsteps and implement a similar venture.

■ *Ice In Every Carriage*, published by Caux books by Michael Henderson, £14.50 (hardback) £9.95 (paperback) is available from reception@london.iofc.org

